



DEALING WITH TRAUMA

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What is trauma and what types of events can lead to trauma?

Trauma is defined as a disordered psychological or behavioral state resulting from mental or emotional stress or physical injury. Examples of traumatic events include car accidents, physical or sexual assaults, crimes, natural disasters, and/or death. In the aftermath of a traumatic event, it is common for an individual to experience psychological stress. This is a normal part of coping with tragedy and is necessary in order to move on to healing.

As our nation approaches the anniversary of events such as those of September 11, 2001, caretakers and professionals must be extra sensitive to the needs of youth as they cope with thoughts and feelings related to the tragic events of that day. The magnitude of the events and the approaching anniversary will undoubtedly reactivate a certain level of stress in many Americans including our youth.

What are some of the signs of someone experiencing trauma?

Reactions to trauma may be immediate or may not appear until weeks later. No two individuals may react in the same manner to trauma and the signs may differ depending on the age of the individual. For example, pre-school age children may cling excessively to adults, experience nightmares and/or sleeplessness, or show unusual emotional reactions such as crying or overreacting to normal situations. Elementary school age children may develop a school phobia (fear of attending school), display a lack of interest in school, experience difficulty concentrating, or develop a lack of trust for adults. Older youth may react by abusing substances, becoming aggressive, or engaging in isolating and other high-risk behaviors. Adults may react to traumatic events and display a variety of emotions to include strained interpersonal relationships, lack of engagement, or the development of physical symptoms.

With the help of parents, teachers, counselors, and friends, youth usually return to normal functioning with little or no difficulty. When symptoms last for more than a month and continue to affect normal functioning, it is recommended that professional help be sought.

For a more comprehensive explanation of reactions to trauma, please see *Reflections of September 11: A Guide for Parents and Teachers* at www.msde.state.md.us.

***What can parents/
guardians do to help
children deal with
trauma?***

Parents can help their children deal with trauma by spending more time with them and allowing them to talk about what they are thinking and feeling. Help them understand that such thoughts and feelings are normal by validating them. Reassure your children that they are safe, cared for, and protected. Hugging a child helps to provide a feeling of security and protection. Parents can also read books and stories with their children that include characters who have faced similar traumatic situations. Playing with children can also relieve the tension and stress brought on by traumatic experiences. Restricting access to repetitive media coverage of the traumatic event can also lessen the effects of the trauma.

For additional information on helping children deal with traumatic events and the media, see *Assignment: Media Literacy* at www.msde.state.md.us/assignmentmedialit/home.html.

***What can schools do
to help children deal
with trauma?***

Schools can help by conducting sessions with entire classes, small groups, or individual students that allow them to voice their thoughts and feelings. Instructional activities (i.e. blood drives, writing letters, and fund raising) may be used to help students appropriately express their feelings in a positive manner. Schools can also help students refocus their thoughts by actively engaging them in the development of strategies that can be used by the school to help students increase their feelings of safety and security. School counselors, nurses, psychologists, social workers, and pupil personnel workers are also available in schools to assist youth in coping with the effects of trauma.

***Who can I contact
for additional
information?***

Contact the principal of your child's school to determine who is available to help your child deal with the aftermath of a traumatic event. Your child's teacher, school counselor, and nurse are wonderful resources in providing effective ways to aid in minimizing the effects of the stress caused by traumatic events.

All 24 of Maryland's local school systems (LSSs) have trauma teams to assist school staff in dealing with the effects of traumatic events that affect the school and community. Contact your local Director of Student Services for more information about these trauma teams.

For information about resources available at the Maryland State Department of Education, please contact Ms. Marcia Lathroum, Guidance Specialist, at (410) 767-0307 or e-mail mlathroum@msde.state.md.us.